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ABSTRACT

Past research has focused on conflict and power between students and teachers from elementary school through high school. A study explored the long neglected area of the college environment and treated the classroom as a unique culture. The construct of challenge behavior is defined as student behaviors that are contrary to implicit or explicit expectations of the classroom. It is also posited that challenge behavior may be motivated by information seeking strategies used to reduce uncertainty. The nature of this construct is explored by asking how students challenge teachers, how teachers respond to challenge behavior, and how students want teachers to respond. Through a 6-phase inductive process involving 60 communication professors and graduate teaching assistants at 2 large southwestern universities, as well as 17 teachers and 237 students, it was discovered that students challenge teachers in order to seek information regarding evaluation expectations, practical explanations, procedural rules, and power plays. Results also indicated that teachers and students prefer collaboration tactics. Findings suggest that students and teachers in the classroom agree that communication is the key to building strong interpersonal relationships in the classroom. Future research should examine to what extent challenge behavior is motivated by uncertainty reduction; explore the construct of challenge behavior across other disciplines, age groups, and cultures; and explore the extent to which teacher clarity can affect the amount of and attitudes toward challenge behavior in the classroom. (Contains 28 references and 2 tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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What Will Happen If: Challenge Behavior in the College Classroom

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Author's Notes:

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Abstract

Past research has focused on conflict and power between students and teachers from elementary school through high school. This study explores the long neglected area of the college environment and treats the classroom as a unique culture. The construct of challenge behavior is defined as student behaviors that are contrary to implicit or explicit expecations of the classroom. It is also posited that challenge behavior may be motivated by information seeking strategies used to reduce uncertainty. The nature of this construct is explored by asking how students challenge teachers, how teachers respond to challenge behavior, and how students want teachers to respond. Through an inductive process, it was discovered that students challenge teachers in order to seek information regarding evaluation expectations, practical explanations, procedural rules, and power plays. It was also determined that teachers and students prefer collaboration tactics. After providing a description of the results, this essay describes implications for instructional scholars and provides suggestions for future research.

Introduction

Instructional communication scholars regard the classroom as a rich, complex communication process. Cooper (1991) defines classroom communication as "verbal and nonverbal transactions between teacher and students and between or among students" (p. 2). This transactional process is "complex, symbolic, and has both a content and a relational component" (p. 3). It is the relational component that is the focus of the present work. According to Cooper, "the relationships we create with our students affect us, our students, and the educational outcomes of our instruction" (p. 7).

The present study is an attempt to describe the nature of challenge behavior in the college classroom. It is our philosophy that before a phenomenon can be tested empirically, it must first be understood through description. In an attempt to explore the nature of challenge behavior, we provide the following theoretical framework.

The theoretical foundation which guides the current research is based on four assumptions which describe our conception of the nature of classroom communication.

The first assumption is that the classroom inherently involves a socialization process. This process is secondary socialization whereby already

socialized individuals are inducted into new sectors of society. Secondary socialization involves learning knowledge relevant to a particular role (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 130). Thus, as teachers and students change classes, they undergo secondary socialization repeatedly. This socialization premise views communication as transactional, socialization as dialectical, and human society as symbolic interaction (Staton, 1990, p. 46). That is, through communication, students are active agents in establishing, maintaining, and changing the conventions of the classroom as a culture (Littlejohn, 1989).

Our second assumption logically follows from the socialization premise and treats the classroom as a unique culture. Because the instructor is the only one who knows what the expectations of the classroom are before the first meeting, they are seen as the only native in the classroom and the students must "identify environmental demands, and speculate about the mediational strategies necessary to meet these demands successfully" (Doyle, 1975, p. 176). Because students have a vested interest in the outcome of the class, they attempt to share ownership of the culture. And as "teachers and students learn the new roles and begin to establish new relationships, the internalization of learning community norms will bring conflict" (Book & Putnam, 1992, p.20). If performance expectations, roles, and norms are not clearly defined by the community,

ambiguity will lead to uncertainty.

Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory provides the foundation for our third assumption. Uncertainty, in this sense, refers to the lack of predictability of the classroom as a culture. When teachers and students meet, the primary concern of students is that of uncertainty about the rules, norms, and expectations of the classroom. Students, therefore, need to gain information about expectations. Students reduce their uncertainty by using different types of information-gaining strategies. They can observe the culture to determine expectations, ask questions, or test the rules or norms in the form of a challenge. These tests can lead to conflict which can, in turn, define the relational component of the classroom climate.

The nature of the resulting conflicts provides the basis of our fourth assumption. Conflict in the classroom can be either destructive or productive depending on how the parties handle the challenge (Hocker, 1986). Unproductive conflicts are characterized by participants' (teacher or student) loss of self-esteem, credibility, composure, trust, or desired information (p. 75). Productive conflicts solve immediate problems while at the same time enhancing the interpersonal relationship of the teacher and student.

Based on the framework just outlined, this study examines the student

challenge behavior in the classroom that is motivated by an attempt to reduce uncertainty about the expectations of the classroom culture.

Review of Literature

Although little work has been done that deals directly with challenging or inappropriate behavior in the college classroom, extensive work has dealt with compliance resistance and power between students and teachers at other educational levels. This study focuses on the long neglected area of the college environment.

Barraclough and Stewart (1992) define power as "the potential or capacity to influence the behavior of some other person or persons. Compliance gaining, or behavior alteration, is the realization of that potential" (p. 4). McCroskey and Richmond (1983) posit that "the use of power is an inherent part of the teaching process" (p. 178).

When dealing with power and communication, it is important to note that power is a perception. A student grants the teacher power over him/her. Power cannot be exerted by a teacher if it is not perceived by the student (Richmond, & Roach, 1992).

According to Burroughs, Kearney, and Plax (1989), "College teaching is misperceived as easy simply because we do not have the discipline problems other

teachers have to deal with at lower grade levels" (p. 214). Adult learners do, however, have numerous methods of attempting to control the classroom. Power in the classroom and teacher efforts to control student behavior have been researched in a series of studies (Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984, 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, & Kearney, 1985; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond,1986; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987). Absent from these studies is an examination of the college classroom and the communication behaviors that occur between the teacher and student when challenging behavior exists.

The college classroom is a very complex setting for negotiation where great sensitivity may be required to deal with teacher/student conflicts (Burroughs, Kearney, & Plax, 1989). Research on discipline in the college classroom can be used to help teachers acquire knowledge which they need to become effective classroom managers (Lasley, 1981).

Communication is the fundamental process through which students create shared understanding with teachers in the classroom environment. Students, through communication, exhibit challenge behavior in order to learn the expectations of the teacher and to make their expectations known (Staton, 1990).

Every time a college student enters a class for the first time, s/he must go

through the process of socialization into this new culture, thus experiencing uncertainty. It is important, therefore, to examine how students seek information in order to reduce uncertainty (Staton, 1990). If they don't observe or ask questions, they may choose to challenge the teacher in order to find out about the expectations of the culture of the classroom. The students may ask themselves, "What will happen if . . .?" In other words, if I don't know what the expectations of the classroom are, what are the consequences of my actions if I violate an implicit expectation? In turn, if the teacher treats this information seeking strategy as a direct challenge, negative conflict may be the result.

According to Hocker and Wilmot (1991), "Conflict is an express struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals" (p. 12). Conflict is often viewed as negative. Conflict can, however, be positive in the classroom when it prompts the teacher and student to alter behavior in such a manner that the learning environment is enhanced (Hocker, 1986; Jamieson & Thomas, 1974; Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Kreidler, 1984; Powell, 1990; Williams & Winkworth, 1974). According to Hocker (1986), "The goals of any productive conflict are to solve the immediate problem represented in the conflict and to enhance the interpersonal relationship to the extent that such is needed to continue

working together. If the problem is solved, but the relationship worsens, the conflict is not settled" (p. 74). The difference between conflict and challenge behavior, then, is that conflict concerns an express struggle between incompatible goals, whereas challenge behavior occurs when students behave contrary to an implicit or explicit expectation of the classroom, and can be motivated by an information seeking strategy used to reduce uncertainty. Challenge behavior, if not explored as such, can lead to conflict which, in turn, can be productive or destructive.

Hocker and Wilmot (1985) suggest that in order to understand conflict, it is important for the individual to understand their conflict style. Thomas-Kilmann (1974) developed a conflict mode instrument which describes a person's behavior along two dimensions--assertiveness and cooperativeness. These two dimensions define five ways of handling conflict: competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, and compromising. According to Kilmann and Thomas (1975), the competitive style is characterized by aggressive and uncooperative behavior. The teacher is trying to "win" a direct confrontation where there is overt disagreement. Collaboration is characterized by high assertiveness and high concern for the student. The student and teacher work creatively to find solutions so that both parties "win". Compromise involves give and take whereby both parties exchange

equal concessions. Avoidance is characterized by nonassertive, passive behavior. This can involve changing the topic or simply withdrawing from dealing with the conflict. Finally, accommodation is nonassertive and cooperative. The teacher lets the student "win." It should be noted that no one style is superior to another. Each style has its advantages and disadvantages depending on the conflict situation. It should also be noted that the collaborative style is the only one that would allow the teacher and student to explore whether the student's behavior is an information seeking strategy or an incompatible goal. This study attempts to identify teacher conflict styles and compare them to student expectations of how they think a teacher should respond.

This review of literature suggests the need to explore the nature of challenge behavior in the college classroom from a unique perspective. That is, based on the theoretical foundations described earlier and the lack of descriptive data provided to date, an examination of the dynamics of challenge behavior in the college classroom may provide teachers with preventative and/or diagnostic tools to deal with certain behaviors that can lead to destructive or productive conflicts. With that in mind, we propose the following research questions:

1. How do students challenge teachers?

2. How do teachers respond to these challenges?

3. How do students want teachers to respond?

4. Do teacher's responses allow for an exploration of the motivation of student challenges?

Method

In order to create an instrument that could address our research questions, we followed an inductive process involving several phases. In phase one, sixty open-ended critical incident surveys were administered to communication professors and graduate teaching assistants at two large, southwestern universities. After reading examples of possible critical incidents, the respondents were asked to write critical incidents they had experienced.

Fifteen surveys were completed for a return rate of 25%. In all, a total of 46 critical incidents were generated by the respondents.

In phase two, the brief narratives were read by the three researchers, and one card was written for each incident containing a brief, non-biased, general description of the challenge behavior.

The cards were then grouped by one of the researchers into five categories as follows: (a) inappropriate behavior, (b) evaluation, (c) procedures, (d)

practicality, and (e) power play. These groupings were a first attempt to content-analyze the critical incidents and create exhaustive and mutually-exclusive categories (Holsti, 1969; Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989; Krippendorff, 1980).

The other two researchers then attempted to place the 46 cards into the five categories. Ten disagreements were recorded for an initial intercoder reliability of 78%. (Holsti's 1968 formula for computing reliability, as cited in Kaid & Wordsworth, 1989).

Two volunteer graduate student coders blind to the purpose of the study were then trained to code the cards using the initial grouping. After the first coder completed the task, it became apparent that the five categories overlapped somewhat and needed to be collapsed to four. This was accomplished by eliminating the category for inappropriate behavior.

The remaining categories are defined as follows: (a) evaluation challenges occur when students question the nature of testing procedures or grades received, (b) procedural challenges occur when students test the rules and norms, whether implicit or explicit, in the classroom, (c) practicality challenges occur when students question the relevance of the course or certain tasks, and (d) power play challenges occur when students try to influence the behavior of the teacher or other students in the class.

After refining the initial category scheme, both volunteer coders then coded the 46 cards independently. Their intercoder reliability was 97%, using the same reliability formula.

In phase three, a frequency survey was created (Critical Incidents Frequency Report) using 35 responses (11 of the items were repetitions) from the four categories to determine the most frequent types of challenge behavior in the college communication classroom. This survey, which used a Likert-type scale was administered to the 60 people who had received the first open-ended critical-incident survey. The respondents were asked: How often do these challenge behaviors occur in your classroom? The respondents were not aware of the four categories of behaviors, just the individual behaviors. Thirty two frequency surveys were completed for a 53% return rate.

Phase four involved analyzing the results of the critical incidents frequency report and identifying the two most frequent behaviors within each category. Each behavior became the subject of a written scenario for a total of eight scenarios. In each, five response options were created to mirror the five categories in the Kilmann-Thomas Conflict Mode Instrument (1974). The following is an example of a scenario with the five response options competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating respectively.

John commented to the instructor on the difficulty of an exam as he turned it in. Later, as the instructor was going over the exam, John persisted in questioning the validity of specific items. If you were the teacher, how would you respond?

A. Tell John that you have a lot of experience in constructing test items and that he is not qualified to question your abilities (competing).

B. Make an appointment with John to discuss why he might have misunderstood some questions and how you might adapt your questions in the future (collaborating).

C. If John provides a reasonable argument for the answer he provided, give him partial credit (compromise).

D. Just move on the next item on the test (avoiding).

E. Give him full credit for the contested items (accomodating).

In order to determine if the responses written for each scenario reflected competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating, a fifth phase was conducted. Two expert coders (instructors of conflict theory) were asked to categorize each response in terms of the five conflict styles. Within this process, five of the 40 responses were altered or rewritten. The coders were then asked to recode the responses, and did so with 100% reliability. This fifth phase

was an attempt to establish content validity through a panel of experts.

In phase six both teachers (8 female, 9 male) and students (134 female, 103 male) were surveyed in an attempt to gain a more complete picture of challenge behavior in the college communication classroom. There were two scenarios for each type of challenge behavior: evaluation, practicality, procedure, and power. Responses to the scenarios were rank ordered by the participants with "1" being the most desirable and "5" being the least desirable. Each response was then totaled in order to determine the most likely to least likely response of collaborate, compromise, compete, accommodate, and avoidance. Individual reports were run for each of the following variables: teachers (faculty and graduate teaching assistants, GTA's), all students, teacher/female, teacher/male, student/female, student/male, faculty, and GTA's.

Results

Results of the study indicate that teachers and students both choose collaborate and compromise as their number one and number two options, respectively, when confronted with or confronting challenge behavior (see Tables). Teachers report competing as their least likely response, whereas students report avoiding as their least preferred.

For the evaluation type of challenge behavior, teachers, students overall,

male students, female teachers, and faculty members are more likely to chose collaboration and least likely to choose accommodation. GTA's, male teachers, and female students select collaboration first and competing last.

When confronted with practicality types of challenge behavior, all teachers, faculty, GTA's, and male and female students chose collaboration first and competing last as their most and least likely responses. Students, both male and female, chose collaboration and avoidance as most and least likely responses.

Procedure challenge behavior response was the same as that identified for practicality with one exception. GTA's tied in competing and accommodation equally as least desirable responses.

For challenge behavior involving power, teachers overall, female teachers, male and female students, and GTA's chose collaboration as most likely and avoidance least likely. Faculty members were most likely to choose collaboration and least likely to select accommodation. Male teachers selected collaboration and competing as their most likely and least likely responses.

Discussion

This study was an attempt to lay the conceptual framework for the nature of challenge behavior in the college classroom. In doing so, we provide some descriptive data on how students challenge teachers, how teachers respond, how

students want teachers to respond, and whether those responses allow for further exploration of the motive behind a challenge behavior.

Students often challenge teachers in order to reduce uncertainty regarding evaluation expectations, practical explanations, procedural rules, and power plays. For example, a student might challenge a teacher by talking to another classmate during class (Procedure) in an attempt to find out "What will happen if" I behave a certain way. How will the teacher respond? In this sense, they are seeking information. The results of this study indicate that teachers respond mostly to challenge behaviors through tactics of collaboration and compromise. Students also report collaboration and compromise as their most preferred response. While collaboration and compromise appear to be the socially desirable responses, there is a discrepancy between teachers and students in terms of least preferred responses. Teachers report competition as the least likely response, whereas students report avoiding as the least preferred. Consequently, teachers are more likely to avoid than to compete, and students would rather they compete than be ignored.

This finding indicates that students are hoping for an opportunity to collaborate with their teacher. This collaboration might lead to information which could reduce uncertainty. Thus, the last thing they want is for the teacher to

avoid the situation. This only creates more uncertainty and leads to destructive conflict--the premise of our fourth assumption.

These findings also indicate that challenge behavior can lead to productive conflict via collaboration. Recall that productive conflict is characterized as solving immediate problems while enhancing the interpersonal relationship of the teacher and student. By definition, collaboration and compromise meet the criteria of productive conflict; competing and avoiding do not.

These findings are encouraging to those of us in the field of instructional communication. Both teachers and students indicate that open communication (collaboration) is socially desirable. Students and teachers in the classroom culture agree that communication is the key to building strong interpersonal relationships in the classroom. Collaboration is characterized by working creatively through communication to solve problems. This communication allows both teacher and student the forum to discuss feelings and the problem at hand. Collaboration implies a willingness to communicate in order to solve the problem. The teacher provides information regarding their expectations, and the student provides information regarding their ability to conform to those expectations. This finding lends credence to the conceptualization of challenge behavior as an information seeking strategy. Perhaps the motivation for students preferring a

collaborative response is to have the opportinuty to seek information regarding a teacher's expectations that were otherwise unclear.

This study has some limitations in that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the difference between a student's behavior that is motivated by an incompatible goal or an information seeking strategy. Until a teacher can understand a student's motivation for certain behaviors, it is difficult to make decisions regarding how to respond to that behavior. It is hoped that this present study sheds some light on an alternative explanation for motivation of challenges that occur in the classroom. Another limitation relates to the low return rates for the critical incidents frequency reports. While this may have been of greater concern had that instrument been an attempt to generalize findings from a sample to a population, such was not the goal at hand. Rather, the instrument allowed us to generate scenarios that reflected actual classroom situations.

This study was an attempt to conceptualize and describe the nature of challenge behavior. Generalizations cannot be made until we first understand what we are exploring. Further research should attempt to test the nature of challenge behavior and make generalizations about the relationship of challenge behavior and collaboration to other constructs such as immediacy, affinity seeking strategies, and teacher effectiveness. To what extent should teachers

demonstrate a willingness to collaborate with their students in order to increase affective learning? How is willingness to collaborate related to students perceptions of immediacy, affinity, and teacher effectiveness?

A question that this research raises is: To what extent is challenge behavior motivated by uncertainty reduction? Are there other motivating factors, and, if so, what are they? This study examines that challenge behavior which is motivated by an attempt to seek information, but, is that the only dynamic taking place? This needs further exploration.

Future research should also explore the construct of challenge behavior across other disciplines, age groups, and cultures. Do our types of challenge behavior apply to younger students or students from other countries? Do teachers of math or science experience the same type of challenge behavior from their students?

Finally, future research should explore the extent to which teacher clarity can affect the amount of and attitudes toward challenge behavior in the classroom. What pertinent information can teachers provide students about their expectations in order to eliminate the need fort certain challenges? Do explicit teachers experience less challenge behavior than non-explicit teachers? Can teachers be trained to prevent or reduce challenge behavior? These questions are just a few of

many that can be explored with the construct of challenge behavior in the classroom. The normative data provided in this study establish the groundwork for future explorations into the nature of challenge behavior and its application to the field of instructional communication.

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TABLE 1 - TEACHER & GTA RESPONSES

SCENARIO	COLLABORATE MEAN/ST. DEV.	COMPROMISE MEAN/ST. DEV.	COMPETE MEAN/ST. DEV.	ACCOMMODATE MEAN/ST. DEV.	AVOID MEAN/ST. DEV.
1 EVALUATION	1.470/.362	1.764/.172	4.176/.537	4.058/.992	3.592/.362
2 PRACTICALITY	1.294/.195	2.058/.166	4.647/.119	3.470/1.149	3.529/.516
3 PROCEDURE	1.176/.248	2.941/.770	4.352/1.656	2.941/.579	3.588/1.134
4 POWER	1.235/.088	2.647/1.366	3.823/1.070	3.352/1.971	3.941/.579
5 EVALUATION	1.529/.062	3.823/.144	4.000/.885	4.176/.378	1.470/.062
6 PRACTICALITY	1.058/.003	3.470/1.416	4.529/.362	2.294/.313	3.647/.119
7 PROCEDURE	1.294/.313	2.411/.506	3.529/.3161	4.058/.770	3.705/.833
8 POWER	1.529/.700	2.117/.478	3.647/2.316	3.941/1.515	3.764/.783

TABLE 2 - STUDENT RESPONSES

SCENARIO	COLLABORATE MEAN/ST. DEV.	COMPROMISE MEAN/ST. DEV.	COMPETE MEAN/ST. DEV.	ACCOMMODATE MEAN/ST. DEV.	AVOID MEAN/ST. DEV.
1 EVALUATION	1.632/.473	1.759/.212	4.164/.850	3.552/1.716	3.092/.518
2 PRACTICALITY	1.746/1.876	2.696/1.776	3.531/13.749	3.552/1.585	3.561/2.085
3 PROCEDURE	1.548/1.343	2.970/.883	4.042/2.729	2.662/.900	3.784/1.937
4 POWER	1.624/1.073	2.443/7.803	3.599/2.019	2.983/1.075	4.354/.589
5 EVALUATION	1.780/.579	3.299/1.038	3.624/2.223	4.261/1.411	2.046/1.170
6 PRACTICALITY	1.405/3.74	3.092/1.580	4.004/1.547	2.367/.732	4.130/.620
7 PROCEDURE	1.894/1.261	2.236/1.172	3.016/3.928	3.839/1.164	4.008/1.454
8 POWER	1.725/.793	2.396/.804	3.232/4	3.278/1.144	4.367/1.327